

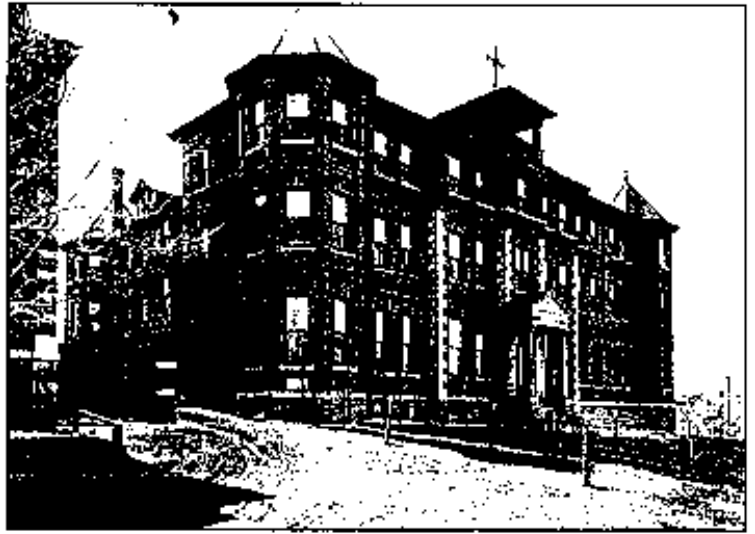
Catholic Hill

Foundations long ago laid continue to touch us today

In 1869, a lay teacher and five courageous Catholic nuns from the order the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, answered a plea to come to Montana Territory and “help in the cause of humanity and Christianity.” A long journey by rail and stage brought the six to the mining settlement along Last Chance Gulch. So prompt were they in answering the call that no accommodations were ready for them. The Jesuit priests relinquished their quarters to the women and moved into the primitive church established in 1866 atop Church Hill. The sisters hoped to fulfill a threefold mission: to educate youth, nurse the sick, and care for orphans.

Father Leopold Van Gorp, S.J. had purchased a tract of land “... 100 feet from north to south on the summit of Church Hill and extending from Ewing Street to Warren Street.” There, in 1870, the Sisters of Charity established St. Vincent’s Academy for Girls (Montana Territory’s first boarding school), a day school for boys, and St. John’s Hospital. In a separate building the sisters also provided the only asylum in the Territory for the mentally ill. The energetic black-and-white robed sisters were a familiar sight, and in a short time Church Hill became known as Catholic Hill.

The fragile frame buildings of Catholic Hill were as vulnerable as any to the many fires that plagued early residents. The worst conflagration started in 1874 on Bridge (now State) Street and quickly moved toward Catholic Hill: “Wind-driven sparks and cinders, flaming shingles and live brands fell thick as snowflakes.” The buildings caught fire



With the advent of the Northern Pacific Railroad, St. John's Hospital was rebuilt in 1884 with 'brick and mortar replacing the frail building material of former days.' (Photos courtesy of Ed Reinig collection, Montana Historical Society)

several times, but the sisters pumped water from the wells and drenched the roofs, preventing total loss.

The Cathedral of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, which stood on Ewing Street between Broadway and Miller, was the first substantial, fire-proof structure on Catholic Hill. It was Helena’s first cathedral, completed in 1877. That year the state hospital was established at Warm Springs, and the sisters renovated the Helena building which had housed the mentally ill. They fulfilled the third part of their mission taking three young siblings into their care in 1881. St. Ambrose’s, named after eldest child Ambrose Sullivan, was the first orphanage in the Territory.



St. Vincent's Academy, above, was replaced by the present St. John's in 1939.

St. Aloysius Select School for Boys opened in 1882, and with the advent of the Northern Pacific Railroad, St. John's Hospital was rebuilt in 1884 to better serve the fast-growing town. Five years later, when Bishop John Brondel laid the cornerstone for a new St. Vincent's, Cathedral pastor Father Palladino noted that the time of temporary structures had passed with "... brick and mortar replacing the frail building materials of former days."

Change—both gradual and sudden—followed these peak years: Montana's first school of nursing was established at St. John's in 1905. St. Aloysius closed in 1910, and St. Helena Cathedral replaced Sacred Hearts in 1914. Still the sisters continued their missions on Catholic Hill until the 1935 earthquakes damaged the buildings so severely that most had to be razed.

Apartments now occupy the former site of St. John's Hospital. The present St. John's physically replaced St. Vincent's Academy in 1939, and it no longer serves as a hospital. The few remnants of the once-vital 1880s complex are the hospital's laundry building (now engineering offices), the back portion of Immaculata Hall (the original St. Aloysius School), and the retaining wall that once encircled the hospital grounds. These survivors represent pioneer institutions in Montana's medical care, education and social service systems. Foundations long ago laid on Catholic Hill, they continue to touch Montanans even today.

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